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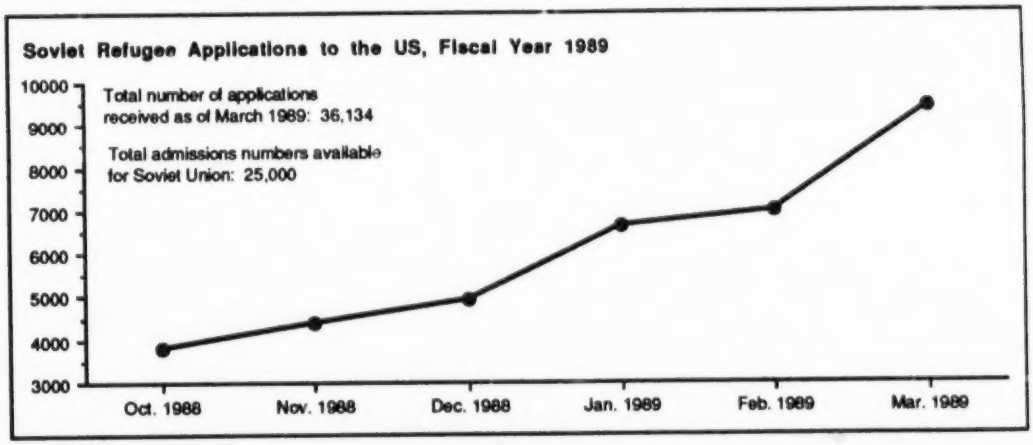
Soviet Emigration: US Policy

April 1989

Background: Sustained US and Western calls for greater freedom to leave the Soviet Union have resulted in record levels of Soviet emigration. Liberalized procedures have produced a flood of Soviet applications for refugee status that have exceeded congressional appropriations, annual admissions ceilings determined by the President, and government and private sector capacity for processing refugees. As a result, the system is backlogged. The US Government is taking special measures to improve this situation. Estimates are that about 70,000 Soviet citizens will seek admission for permanent settlement this fiscal year. Most applicants have been Soviet Jews and Armenians, but many Pentecostals and members of other religious and minority groups also have applied.

US policy on refugee admissions: The increased rate of Soviet emigration is a major success for US foreign and human rights policy, and the US is firmly committed to encouraging it. The consequences of this success, however, have presented the US with a complex situation in which many important considerations--including humanitarian, foreign policy, legal, and budgetary factors--must be weighed. The US Government is trying to meet this challenge in a way that does not distort or compromise its commitment to maintain an equitable worldwide refugee admissions and assistance program. This requires constant balancing of resource, program, and policy demands.

For fiscal year 1989, the overall global refugee program encompasses multilateral humanitarian assistance for some 13 million refugees, as well as admission of up to 94,000 refugees. Of this amount, 25,000 admissions numbers are available for refugees from the Soviet Union.



Application process: The US continues to offer the opportunity for admission to all Soviets who desire to emigrate to this country. Some enter the US as regular immigrants; most seek admission as refugees.

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To qualify as refugees under US law, applicants must demonstrate individually "a well-founded fear of persecution" on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Not all Soviet applicants meet these criteria. Those who do not are offered public interest parole status. The Federal Government funds benefits, including transportation loans and resettlement support assistance, for refugees but not for parolees or immigrants. Parolees must furnish evidence they will not become public charges.

Recent US Government actions: Soviet emigration is a high priority of the Bush Administration, and many special measures have already been taken to relieve the backlog:

- The President has transmitted to the Congress his proposal to raise the worldwide refugee admissions ceiling by 22,500 admissions numbers to a new level of 116,500.

- The Administration has requested $85 million in supplemental funding to meet additional Soviet refugee admissions requirements.

- Existing Soviet admissions numbers have been used ahead of schedule to help keep pace with the rate of applications.

- The Attorney General is using his parole authority to provide a potential legal means of entry into the US for all Soviet applicants who do not qualify as refugees.

- The Departments of State and Justice have proposed legislation establishing a new category of immigrant whose admission is deemed to be in the US national interest. It would provide some 30,000 admissions numbers annually for persons other than refugees.

- Additional personnel are being assigned to accelerate the interviewing process.

- Private organizations are being consulted about providing funding for refugee admissions. Of the global refugee admissions ceiling of 94,000 for fiscal year 1989, the State Department has appropriations to fund only 84,000 numbers.

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